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ABSTRACT

Family stories, told and retold, become important vehicles in shaping the lives of family members. Knowing and understanding family narratives can aid students in understanding their families' histories, communication patterns, and meanings. The stories are a cohesive element for holding the family together, and may also capture the essence of the personality of members. Family therapists can use the stories, particularly in working with dysfunctional families, to learn more about the family and how it operates. Family myths have stabilizing effects on the family and communication patterns. In a family communication course, teacher and student alike can provide personal stories. Students may begin by interviewing an older relative, and continue to collect stories through the semester. When students have difficulty collecting stories, the instructor may assign a questionnaire. For illustrative purposes, the instructor should maintain a collection of stories from personal experience or family history. As an alternative, required readings may include published family stories. The use of family stories promotes family awareness, intergenerational sharing, an understanding of family and self, and appreciation for the uniqueness of the family. The family narrative is a part of personal heritage, uniting a family's past and its present and providing a link to future generations. Nineteen notes are included. Four appendixes (an informational letter about the course, an assignment, a memory book project, and a family questionnaire) are attached. (SG)

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FAMILY NARRATIVE: How Our Stories Shape Us

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Miami Beach, November, 1993

CS508454

My grandmother's many stories about her mother, Margaret, were always tales of hardship. Poor Margaret had to take care of the house and younger children while her mother smoked her pipe and went fishing. Poor Margaret fell in love with and married a dashing Confederate hero but he became a drunkard. The stories always ended with Margaret leaving her husband in Virginia. With both pride and sadness in her voice, grandma would conclude, "That poor young woman arrived in Ohio with four little children and only twelve dollars in her pocket!"

When my husband was buried and I returned home with my teenage children, my sister reassured me, "I don't worry about you. In our family, Margarets survive!"

Margaret of Ohio

Family stories such as this, told and retold, become important vehicles in shaping the lives of family members. Although all our families tell stories about events recent and long ago, most of us are unaware of the role of storytelling in the life of the family. In *Black Sheep & Kissing Cousins: How our family stories shape us* (1988), Elizabeth Stone tells us,

> Our meanings are almost always inseparable from stories, in all realms of life. . . family stories, invisible as air, weightless as dreams, are there for us. To make our own meanings out of our myriad stories is to achieve balance--at once a way to be part of and apart from our families, a way of holding on and letting go.
>
> (244)

She makes a strong case for the importance of the story in family communication, arguing that family stories meet three essential needs. These are (1) to persuade the members they are special, more wonderful than neighbors, (2) to teach about the ways of the world and the family's methods of coping with troubles and successes, and (3) to help a person know his own identity.

In studying and teaching family communication, I have come to believe that family tales are part of our heritage, our communication baggage. Knowing and understanding family narratives can aid students in understanding their families' histories, communication patterns, and meanings.

As we have placed little emphasis on family stories in the family communication course, we have been overlooking a rich pedagogical resource. This essay will argue for using family stories in the family communication class by (1) examining the contribution of other disciplines to understanding the roles of narrative[1] in family communication and (2) describing a method of incorporating family stories in the family communication class.

THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN FAMILY LIFE

From the beginning, family communication scholars have acknowledged the centrality of the family of origin to the behavior of family members. Galvin and Brommel's first family text (1981) emphasized this connection.

The role of storytelling, however, is a newer consideration. The importance of narrative in families is now recognized by many. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992), like Stone, describe life narratives as a "means by which identities may be fashioned." Personal stories are important because of their formative or deformative powers. (1) Carolyn Ruffin (1993) writes:

> . . . telling and retelling those small tales has allowed our family to pass along something we might not otherwise have put forward in quite so lasting a form. We have been able to show each other in just how much detail we have observed and loved one another. . . [Stories] are our medium of exchange . They are one important shape loves takes among us.

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[1]Although some make distinctions, the terms "folklore," myth," "narrative," and "story" tend to be used interchangeably. These words will be used as synonyms throughout this paper.

Although other disciplines have long been interested in the family tale as sources of information about families and individuals, we have tended not to utilize these understandings in our teaching. The work of folklorists, psychologists, sociologists and family therapists has created a sizeable body of literature which reveals that family narratives serve many communication functions for the family. From these works we can learn much about family communication; a sampling follows.

Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Baker in *A Celebration of American Family Folklore* (1982), an excellent anthology and analysis of a portion of the Smithsonian collection[2], comment that family stories whether true or fictional stand for much larger quantities of experience. They serve as a cohesive element for holding the family together. These tales may also capture the essence of the personality of members. Although frequently told during pleasant ritualistic events such as holidays, remembered episodes may also mark changes and upheavals in family history.

Among the stories which describe both the personality of the member and a family theme is this which celebrates the perseverance of the teller and the theme of overcoming adversity:

> The story that's on my mind is on my mind because I just got word that my great-uncle Jim died. His name was Jim Cobb and this is a story he used to tell me about looking for work in the Depression. He'd been out of work like everybody else for months and months and pounded the pavement and wore out the soles of his shoes--his shoes were threadbare and so forth. And finally he got hired and the man who hired him, as he told the story, said, "I want you to know why you got this job because there were twenty or thirty other applications. I hired you because you polished around the soles of your shoes, you polished the edges of your shoe soles." And the man said, "I think that's a sign of somebody who'll take pride in his work." And

---

[2]The Office of Folklife Programs of the Smithsonian Institute has been involved in collecting family folklore since at least 1974. The Library of Congress' American Folklore Center in Washington, DC, is a repository for stories.

I polish the soles of my shoes to this day.

Warren Corbett, age 30 (50)

Stone (1988) points out that most families have Depression stories such as the Corbett story. She argues that these stories also serve as a family's celebration of itself for surviving.

In stories which prescribe family rules, Stone includes this:

> When my mother was a little girl in Norway her older brother, Daniel, once took umbrage at some trifle and ran away to sea--this was at a rather tender age, perhaps thirteen. His family worried a good deal about him in spite of reassurance from the father that no captain would hire him on as he was too young. Sure enough, some days later, the mother, looking out the window of their house, saw her errant son returning home, far down the road. She immediately marshalled her family and directed them to present a scene of complete calm: sewing, reading, or chess-playing with total absorption. They were not even to look up or comment when Daniel came in the door. Indeed, no one was to indicate in any way that the boy had ever been missed.
>
> (78)

Stories illustrating the remaining family functions are included throughout the book.

Stories of parents and grandparents "tell you who they were--their values, their dreams, plans and hopes," asserts Peninnah Schram (1990) of NAPPS (National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling). She continues, "When a generation can feel its ancestors' feelings, share their ideas and sorrow, the lessons of their lives will live on. . . Storytelling not only reflects but perpetuates life."

Occupational stories, which may include family history, serve to both shape and express multiple identities for the tellers argue folklorists Lloyd and Mullen (1990). Personal experience stories reflect signs of personality, ethnicity, religious beliefs and family relationships. They contend that a person selects those experiences from his or her life in which symbolic value can be discerned. For example, a fisherman will choose

occupational experiences that will "communicate what he and other fishermen think are significant events. A fisherman may repeat a story of a near miss with a freighter but not one about a hole in his net because the self-image he wants to project is partially based on danger but not the mundane details of his work." Many stories of the Lake Erie fishermen emphasize the importance of the Protestant work ethic:

> Tell you another funny thing that happened, you know. Years ago, as I told you, you worked seven days a week, and there was no eight-hour day like there is now. In fact, I joined what was called the trap netters' union at one time. There was lots of fishermen at that time, and the contract called for ten-hour days, eleven in the spring and fall when you was setting and pulling the nets, to get them out of the lake or something. But you worked ten hours a day and didn't think anything of it. Finally, got to a nine-hour day. Finally down to eight. Well, I was out in the lake and just started with an eight hour day, and looked at my watch, and said, "Oh, my gosh, the day is gone, we gotta get started for home. We're going to be working overtime." And one of the fellas said, "I've never seen anything like it." He says, "I can stand on my head eight hours." Other fella in the boat say, "Why I can hold my breath for that long." It seemed so short after working for ten hours to work for eight.
>
> (122)

Lloyd and Mullen stress the need to examine both the personal stories and those of the group when studying identity. These stories may, as well, give insight into the development of biosocial roles within the family unit.

In *Plains Families*, sociologists McNall and McNall (1983) use family tales to examine many constructs which impact family communication including status, roles, norms, gender roles, and family stratification. Using stories of midwestern families, they showed that family artifacts and stories can be used to teach about these concepts. Psychologist Mary Gergen (1992) argues that the way we tell our stories reveals our

sense of gender identification while Wambolt and Wolin (1988) present a theory of mate selection and premarital behavior based on partners' family myths.

Family therapists studying the family as a system also often use the narrative to learn more about the family and how it operates. Working primarily with dysfunctional families, therapists tend to view the story as a "myth" with explanatory significance for family behavior. While definitions of "myth" abound, they seem to have common elements including family narrative. Keen (1988) refers to "interlocking stories, rituals, rites, customs and beliefs that give a pivotal sense of meaning and direction to a person, a family, a community or a culture."

Pillari (1986) concluded that family myths which may be toxic, less toxic, or positive "provide the organizing principles and help make sense of the very complicated dynamics with which families operate."

> John Howard mentioned that he was expected to be like his father who was handsome looking and played around. John was constantly compared to him and he lived up to it. He played around and his marriage broke up. However, he consoled himself: "I was just like my father."
>
> (164)

Pillari contends that family myths have stabilizing effects on the family and communication patterns. Some families are emotionally involved with little differentiation and their negative myths sustain conflicts, anger, fears, and scapegoating. Others maintain myths that encourage distancing with limited discussions of feelings and little expression of disagreements or anger. In functional families, myths are both positive and negative, more reality-oriented, and help family members to develop and function meaningfully in society.

Walsh (1983) argues that cultural myths which do not fit the experience of most families (e.g. normal families are problem-free; healthy families maintain the traditional male/female role division) contribute to or are used to justify dysfunctional family patterns.

This sample of works from other disciplines suggests family stories demonstrate many variables typically included in the family communication course: cohesiveness, flexibility, themes, images, biosocial roles, rules; how the family handles changes both predictable and unpredictable; how the family deals with conflict.

The myths of Margaret of Virginia served several of these functions for Margaret of Ohio. The younger woman early sensed the virtue of young girls who helped with family chores especially when mothers were not industrious. Her own mother also a dreamer, the later-day Margaret felt compelled to do homemaking chores. Values of hard work and "making do" were reinforced with each telling of the story by grandmother and father. Little mention of great-grandfather and none of drinking or divorce taught taboo topics. Meeting adversity and surviving were important long before Margaret was widowed.

FAMILY STORIES IN THE FAMILY COMMUNICATION CLASS

The role of the oft-told family tale has received little emphasis in the family communication course. Literature, however, is often used as a teaching tool; a common assignment asks students to analyze movies and novels for understanding communication strategies. I include an analysis of a movie or novel in my course.

The student's "personal literature," however, has not been widely used for the same purposes. The brief example of other disciplines' understanding of family narrative demonstrates this material can enrich our courses.

The first family communication texts did not mention family narrative overtly although Galvin and Brommel's *Family Communication, Cohesion & Change* (1981, 1986) has consistently used short stories and scenarios, in outtake format, to illustrate concepts. The 3rd edition (1991) discusses the role of family metaphor in teaching family themes, rules and other variables. Stories, personal and family, are also used liberally in Pearson's *Communication in the Family* (1989). *Understanding Family*

Communication (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Bochner, 1990), also briefly discusses the role of myth and metaphor in family communication.

Yerby et. al. (1990) describe myths as serving four functions: (1) managing painful events (2) maintaining family values and beliefs (3) providing rationalizing tools and (4) sustaining bonds between the generations. Sample stories are not included, however, in this work.

In teaching the family communication course, I have used as have most instructors, my own personal stories to clarify behaviors and principles. I have found also that students often supply their own narratives both in the classroom and in written assignments. Stone's book, my classroom experiences, and the works mentioned in preceding sections all contributed to the decision to add a narrative focus to the course.

I incorporated family stories and story telling to develop a greater appreciation for the family of origin and to provide examples of communication processes. Another, but surely not unimportant, motivation was that family stories are interesting and enjoyable. I first used this strategy in the Spring Semester of 1990.

Personal stories are collected, written, and analyzed early in the semester. Students who enroll for the course receive their first assignment before leaving on Christmas vacation. I ask them to listen for family stories during the holiday season, a prime storytelling time in many families. I also suggest that they use a tape recorder to capture the wording of those stories which might reveal something about relationships or family members.

Another suggestion is to interview a member of an older generation, preferably a grandparent. A few questions for the interview are given: Was Dad the breadwinner? Were there topics which were taboo? Were children expected to be quiet and submissive? How was affection shown? (Appendix A)

During the third week of the class, a discussion of the role of family stories focuses on Stone's (1988) three realms. I add family stories from several sources to demonstrate the significance of the tales to family communication processes. Students

are then to write several of their own family stories. (Appendix B) The assignment produced stories such as this grandmother's story about gender rules in her family:

> The boys were just getting bicycles and, of course, at that time a girl was taught that a lady didn't ride a bicycle and we (my sisters and I) all wanted to ride it. So we did. My father saw me on it once and told me if he ever saw me on it again, he'd switch me right in front of the boys and I had never had a switching, but of course I didn't expect him to catch me. Saturday afternoon we all had our baths; everybody went uptown on Saturday night. That's when mother was still living, and we were all ready and my father, I thought he was going clear up town but he was just going to the corner grocery store. I got on the bicycle and rode down. Every time I go past there I think of it; there was a big old weeping willow tree there. There was my father when I got down, just coming home and he said, "Get off that!" and I did. He reached up and took a switch off that (the weeping willow tree). Didn't hurt, just the embarrassment. I took the bicycle, had to wheel it up and give it to the boys. That was the only time.

These stories become a part of the Memory Books which students created to hand down to their children to preserve communication-significant materials about the class member's family of origin.

Emphasis is now placed on students' continuing to collect stories throughout the semester. More class time also is spent on the analysis of stories so that students can be aware of the role of stories in the development of family rules, norms, and beliefs as well as the effects of those stories on family members.

I developed the Memory Book assignment several years ago to encourage students to record communication patterns in their family of origin. These collections were designed to aid (1) students' understanding of self as they begin to negotiate rules in new families and (2) in providing family information for their children at some future time.

Included in the Memory Book in addition to the stories and intergenerational interviews are short papers on (1) Cohesion and Adaptability (2) Communication Rules and Roles (3) Couple Types and (4) Conflict. (Appendix C)

Throughout the semester, students are asked to share their stories which related to course materials; no student is required to divulge family secrets. Most choose to share and continued to seek out family stories as the semester continued. The students' report they enjoyed both the collecting and the sharing of the stories and respond favorably on the assignments as learning experiences. One student commented, "It was fun to see the abstract ideas at work in my family stories. I have a better appreciation of some of our behaviors!"

There were problems initially. Some students had difficulty completing the assignment while others indicated their families told very few stories. Although we acknowledged some families do indeed tell fewer stories than others, it was also determined that the assignment was too vague. The questionnaire in Zeitlin et.al. was selected to assist in future story collecting. Later a student using the instrument in an independent project found it elicited family history but few family stories. A modified questionnaire was developed for succeeding classes. (Appendix D)

For this approach, the instructor should have a well-developed collection of stories for illustrative purposes. Some of these may be personal stories if one feels free to disclose them. Community research is another source of stories. A student gathered family stories by interviewing elders at a local senior citizens' center; these were transcribed, edited for anonymity, and interpreted for use in the class.

Another possibility for adding a narrative emphasis is including a collection of family stories in the required reading. Stone's *Kissing Cousins* is a possibility as is *Plains Families*. Many other collections of both family stories and interpretative materials exist, dating from the 1940's. The Zeitlin book contains a bibliography of 34 collections of stories and 16 citations of interpretative materials. These groups of

stories tend to center on ethnic or occupational groups; these could provide insight for students of similar backgrounds.

The use of the family story is a viable addition to the study of family communication. It promotes family awareness, intergenerational sharing, an understanding of family and self, and an appreciation for the uniqueness of the family. The concept of family takes on new meaning as stories are shared, recorded, and analyzed. Students become interested, enriched.

The family narrative is a part of one's heritage, one's communication baggage. The family story which unites the family's history and its present is also a link to future generations. As Russell Baker (1982) comments in his autobiography, *Growing Up;*

> We all come from the past, and children ought to know what it was that went into their making, to know that life is a braided cord of humanity stretching up from time long gone, and that it cannot be defined by the span of a single journey from diaper to shroud.

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APPENDIX A

MEMORANDUM

TO: Students enrolled in Family Communication
FROM: Dr. Wolff
DATE: December, 1993
SUBJECT: Talking with your family

I am very pleased that you have enrolled in CTA 254 next semester. I hope you will find the course interesting and useful; I'm looking forward to working with you.

There are two assignments in the course which you might wish to work on over break when you are enjoying the holidays with your families. A very early assignment will be to identify and record several family stories which are meaningful to you; stories which reveal something about relationships in your family or which tell us something about family members. Ex., in my family there are many, many stories describing my stubborn independence, revealing my father's easy going nature, recounting my mother's efforts to escape dreary chores. If your family is at all like mine, many of these stories are told again during these holidays. So listen up and you'll have one assignment underway (using a tape recorder is a good idea, if others don't mind).

Later in the course, you will need to conduct an interview with a member of an older generation, preferably your grandparents' generation. In that interview you should be asking questions such as these: What were the rules in the family, especially about communication, when you were growing up? What roles were assigned to family members and how strictly were they adhered to (ex., was Dad the breadwinner, the disciplinarian, the decision-maker?) Were there topics about which you could not talk (ex., my grandmother did not allow us to discuss a cousin's divorce!) Was conversation generally open or were children expected to be quiet and submissive? How was affection shown in the family? Did the family have any sayings which described the family (ex., Jones' always help their neighbors, go to church, do well in school). Were friends and outsiders welcome? How did your family react in a crisis or hardship? What were the family rituals? What special ways did the family have of celebrating special days and events? What was your overall impression of the family when you were young? What family stories do you remember?

I have included a questionnaire to help you think of questions to ask. But remember, it is stories we're interested in. So ask for stories and gently remind your kin that you are specifically looking for oft-told tales. Sometimes these come without asking; in some families we need to do more encouraging! In many families women are the primary storytellers so if Dad and Grandpa aren't too willing, do try Mother, Grandma and Aunt Sally!

I strongly urge that you use a tape recorder for the interview so that you have a record both for the later assignment and to preserve some of this information for other generations!

Mostly enjoy the time with your family! But I thought it might be easier for some of you to work on these assignments now rather than later in the spring when finding these people may be more difficult.

I look forward to the beginning of the class.

Merry Christmas and Happy new Year!!!

Family Stories & the World

Survival, Hierarchies and Great Ancestors
Money, Self-Worth and Lost Fortunes

Family Stories & the Individual

The Baby
Sons and daughters & Gender identity
Fairy Godmothers & Patron Saints
In Pursuit of Freedom

Grading:

The stories will be graded on an A-F basis. Grading criteria are these:

I. At least 3 stories have been included.

II. Paper indicates that careful transcription of the stories has occurred.

III. Analysis of each story is at least one paragraph.

IV. Papers are neat and easily read.

NOTE: **Neither your family nor the actual stories are being evaluated in this assignment. I am looking for your understanding of the role of the story in your family's life.**

[1] *BLACK SHEEP & KISSING COUSINS*, Elizabeth Stone. *TIMES BOOKS*, 1988.

APPENDIX B

Family Stories Assignment

Assignment Objectives:

1. Appreciation of family heritage as revealed in family stories.
2. Recording family stories for the Memory Books.
3. Practice in recording stories, conversation.
4. Determining the function of selected family stories.
5. Identify examples of communication variables in family communication.

Recording Family Stories:

1. Think of some stories you have heard told by family members. These might be incidents in your family history, interesting tales that are a part of your family traditions, incidents which occurred in your parents' families of origin or between you and your siblings, or conversations you have heard repeated over and over.

2. Record each story, being as accurate as you can in selecting the same words and details you have heard in your family. If you have tape recordings of the stories, copy them verbatim. The following story outline may help you remember some of the details:

   I. Introduction - to help your audience put the story in context (Time, Place, Setting, Characters, Previous events necessary to the understanding of story).

   II. Body - the events in the story presented in the order in which they occur.

   III. Climax - the high point of the story to which the episodes lead or build.

   IV. Conclusion - disposal of characters, unraveling of plot.

3. Analyze your stories using Stone's categories and your consideration of the significance of each in the life of your family. What is the story saying about your family, about how members are to behave, to react to the world? Does the story have meaning to you? What does it tell us about the concepts we've been studying such as family themes, images, boundaries, cohesiveness, adaptability, rules, roles? <u>You must hand in at least three stories.</u>

Stone's Categories[1]

<u>Family Stories & the Family</u>
- Ground Rules
- Definitions
- Love, Lineage and Marriage
- Dealing with Anger, Sickness, Suicide & other troubles
- Myths of Explanation

APPENDIX C

MEMORY BOOK PROJECT

During this course, we will frequently be discussing the influence of our family or origin on our communication patterns. Most of us have little difficulty identifying these influences once we begin to think about family communication. It is more difficult to determine the origin of those patterns which seem so natural to us. If we learned from our parents, did they learn from theirs? Will our children learn from us? The answers are obvious.

Since few families talk about their communication (we call that "metacommunication"), most of us don't know how our parents began using a particular pattern. For example, if your parents never quarrel, did both sets of grandparents avoid conflict as much as possible? Or did one or both sets quarrel so much that your parents vowed never to quarrel? Did you family themes come from grandparents? Or are they new with your parents?

You will be asked to write brief papers describing the ways in which your family or origin has handled several of the variables which we will be discussing in class. More details are given in the syllabus. Each paper should contain a description of the concept which is the topic of the paper (ex., Adaptability and Cohesiveness) and a description of your observations of your family. Be certain to include examples of communication transactions which demonstrate your conclusions.

One paper will be based on an interview with a member of your family at least one generation older than you. You could talk with your parents about their childhood. If possible, try to interview a grandparent for his/her perspective and memories.

Papers will be evaluated according to (1) your understanding of the basic concepts (2) your analysis of family transactions which demonstrate the concepts (3) readability (style, mechanics). *I will not be evaluating your family!!! Only I will read your work and I promise you that all of your work will be confidential.* In the actual grading, I will use one of three marks:

(x) paper fulfills the assignment
(+) Material is well presented and goes beyond the norm in describing the communication patterns
(-) paper does not fulfill the assignment.

At the conclusion of the course, you will combine all of your papers in a "Memory Book" which you can save to present to your children so that they can better understand where your communication strategies originated. I would urge each of you to be creative in compiling this book. Add family trees, family pictures, art works. The written material must be typed and the entire project must be bound. There are several types of binders/folders available in the bookstore for this purpose.

APPENDIX D

FAMILY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What do you know about your family surname? Its origin? Its meaning? Did it undergo change coming from the old country to the United States? Are there stories about the change?

2. Are there any traditional first names, middle names, or nicknames in your family? Is there a naming tradition, such as always giving the firstborn son the name of his paternal grandfather?

3. Can you sort out the traditions in your current family according to the branches of the larger family from which they have come? Does the overall tradition of a specific grandparent seem to be dominant?

4. What stories have come down to you about your parents? Grandparents? More distant ancestors? How have you learned from them about their childhood, adolescence, schooling, marriage, work, religion, political activity, recreation? Are they anxious or reluctant to discuss the past? Do their memories tend to cluster about certain topics or time periods and avoid others? Are there certain things in your family history that you would like to know, but no one will tell you? Do various relatives tell the same stories in different ways? How do these versions differ?

5. Do you have a notorious or infamous character in your family's past? Do you relish stories about him/her? Do you feel that the infamy of the ancestor may have grown as stories passed down about him/her have been elaborated?

6. How did your parents, grandparents, and other relatives come to meet and marry? Are there family stories of lost love, jilted brides, unusual courtships, arranged marriages, elopements, runaway lovers?

7. Have any historical events affected your family? For example, how did your family survive the Depression? Did conflict over some national event such as the Civil War or Vietnam cause a serious break in family relationships?

8. Are there any stories in your family about how a great fortune was lost or almost (but not quite) made? Do you believe them? Are these incidents laughed about or deeply regretted? If a fortune was made, who was responsible and how was it achieved?

9. What expressions are used in your family? Did they come from specific incidents? Are there stories which explain their origin? Is a particular member of the family especially adept at creating expressions?

10. How are holidays celebrated in your family? What holidays are most important--national, religious, or family? What innovations has your family made in holiday celebrations? Has your family created entirely new holidays?

11. Does your family hold reunions? How often? When? Where? Who is invited? Who comes? Who are the organizers and hosts? What occurs during the reunion? Are there traditional foods, customs, activities? Are stories and photographs exchanged? Are records (oral, written, visual) kept? By whom?

12. Have any recipes been preserved in your family from past generation? What was their origin? How were they passed down - by word of mouth, by observation, by written recipes? Are they still in use today? When? By whom? Does grandmother's apple pie taste as good now that it's made by her granddaughter?

13. What other people (friends, household help, etc.) have been incorporated into your family? When? Why? Were these people given family title such as aunt or cousin? Did they participate fully in family activities?

14. Is there a family cemetery or burial plot? Who is buried with whom? Why? Who makes burial place decisions? If there are gravemarkers, what type of information is recorded on them?

15. Does your family have any heirlooms, objects of sentimental or monetary value that have been handed down? What are they? Are there stories connected with them? Do you know their origin and line of passage through the generation? If they pass to you, will you continue the tradition, sell the objects, or give them to museums?

16. Does your family have photo albums, scrapbooks, slides, home movies? Who created them? Whose pictures are contained in them? Whose responsibility is their upkeep? When are they arranged and edited? Does their appearance elicit commentary? What kind? By whom? Is the showing of these images a happy occasion?